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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 515th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 11 October 1996, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (United Republic of Tanzania)

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CLOSURE OF THE SESSION

The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

INTER-SESSIONAL MEETINGS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE IN 1997

CONSIDERATION OF APPLICATIONS BY GOVERNMENT OBSERVER DELEGATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE INTER-SESSIONAL MEETINGS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE IN 1997 (agenda item 9)

1. The CHAIRMAN drew attention to the draft programme of work for the Standing Committee in 1997, which had been distributed in the form of draft decision DC/CN.7. The identical text was found in paragraph 27 of the draft report of the forty-seventh session.

2. The draft programme of work included recurrent issues, issues pending from former Executive Committee decisions and new issues emerging from the deliberations of the Standing Committee and the current plenary session.

3. Also under agenda item 9, the Executive Committee was called on to consider applications by Government observer delegations to participate in the inter-sessional meetings of the Standing Committee in 1997. In accordance with a decision of the Executive Committee in 1988, meetings of subsidiary organs were open to participation by Government observer delegations which made formal applications for approval by the plenary. On the basis of applications received, the Secretariat had published a list for consideration in draft decision DC/CN.8.

Draft decision on the programme of work of the Standing Committee in 1997 (DC/CN.7)

4. Mr. DENHAM (Ireland) said that the body of the draft should contain a reference to the valuable discussions that had been held on the annual theme.

5. Mr. HALL (Secretary of the Executive Committee) suggested, in order to take that suggestion into account, that the phrase "discussions on the annual theme, and" should be added after the word "including", in the preambular paragraph.

6. The CHAIRMAN said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Executive Committee adopted the inter-sessional programme of work as amended.

7. It was so decided.

Applications by Government observers for participation in the inter-sessional meetings of the Standing Committee in 1997 (DC/CN.8)

8. Mr. HALL (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that additional applications had been received from the following countries: Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Luxembourg, Poland, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Those countries should be added to the list contained in document DC/CN.8.

9. Mrs. JANJUA (Pakistan) asked whether countries that had not yet applied to participate could do so later on.

10. Mr. HALL (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that, in accordance with the decision taken in 1988, applications for participation had to be approved by the Executive Committee.

11. The CHAIRMAN said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Executive Committee approved the list of observer Governments as amended.

12. It was so decided.

CONSIDERATION OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 10)

Draft decision on the provisional agenda of the forty-eighth session (DC/CN.9)

13. The CHAIRMAN drew delegations' attention to the draft provisional agenda of the forty-eighth session, which reflected the new format of the Executive Committee's agenda, introduced in the 1995 decision on Executive Committee working methods, and discussions among Executive Committee member delegations in their consultations with the Rapporteur.

14. If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Executive Committee agreed to adopt the proposal contained in document DC/CN.9 as the provisional agenda of its forty-eighth session.

15. It was do decided.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS (agenda item 11)

16. No delegation having requested the floor under agenda item 11, the CHAIRMAN declared the item closed.

ADOPTION OF THE DRAFT REPORT OF THE FORTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (agenda item 12)

17. The CHAIRMAN said that, in accordance with established practice, the draft report consisted in large part of the conclusions and decisions of the Executive Committee. Some had been adopted at the end of debate under different agenda items. Others had been introduced in plenary following an intensive process of consultation involving all Executive Committee members under the chairmanship of the Rapporteur, whom he called on to introduce the draft report.

18. Mr. SCHOOF (Rapporteur) read out the list of decisions and conclusions contained in the draft report. They had been the subject of an intensive process of consultation involving all Executive Committee members. The conclusion on the CIS Conference had been formally adopted in plenary, as had three other draft decisions submitted to the current meeting. The other decisions and conclusions had all been carefully reviewed and revised according to changes suggested by delegations, and all had ultimately achieved consensus in the informal consultations. The texts had been introduced in

plenary under the appropriate agenda items and were now forwarded for final adoption in the framework of the draft report before the Executive Committee.

19. Mr. SIDDIQUI (Pakistan) said that he would like the record to reflect his delegation's position on international protection of refugees. Although Pakistan agreed that some refugee-producing situations, such as that of the Afghan refugees, could develop into long-term situations, it was convinced that they could only be resolved through voluntary repatriation. He hoped that the re-establishment of peace in Afghanistan would enable the Afghan refugees to be repatriated with dignity and honour. In most cases, and certainly when large numbers of refugees were concerned, local integration was not a solution. It was in any case neither possible nor acceptable for Pakistan with respect to the Afghan refugees. A perfect illustration was the long-standing tension between the local population and the refugees in the regions in Pakistan where the latter had settled. Resettlement in a third country could only be considered as a last resort. It was part of durable solutions. It was essential for the international community to share responsibility for supporting the refugees with the countries of first asylum.

20. Pakistan understood the concerns of some countries which were having to deal with the problem of asylum seekers. The right to seek asylum, however, was recognized by the International Bill of Human Rights. The criteria for granting asylum were becoming more and more restrictive and harsh. Yet arbitrarily rejecting or refusing to consider applications for asylum meant going against the rules of international protection, and represented a diminution of the right to seek asylum. It might be wondered whether the criteria had been changed because asylum-seekers' countries of origin were not the same as in the past. Pakistan agreed that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between refugees and asylum seekers, hence to define precisely UNHCR's role in such cases. It did believe, however, that UNHCR should focus its work primarily on refugees.

21. The CHAIRMAN said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Executive Committee adopted the draft report, it being understood that the amendment to draft decision DC/CN.7 would also be added to the introductory sentence in paragraph 27 of the draft report.

22. It was so decided.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

23. Mrs. OGATA (High Commissioner for Refugees) noted with satisfaction that all delegations had recognized the need to address forced displacement in a comprehensive manner, above all by attacking the political as well as economic root causes of the problem, including poverty. A comprehensive approach also meant engaging the responsibility of everyone, the countries concerned as well as the international community. Often, more attention was paid to the onerous responsibilities of asylum States than to those of refugee-producing States to re-admit their citizens and create the conditions for the refugees to return in peace and with full respect for their human rights. The growing number of situations in which refugees fell victim to disputes over their nationality and became de facto stateless persons was a matter of concern.

24. Although voluntary repatriation undoubtedly remained the preferred solution, combining it with local integration and resettlement would lead to faster progress. It was encouraging to note that delegations had acknowledged the link between rehabilitation and repatriation on the one hand, and consolidating peace and resuming development on the other.

25. UNHCR remained committed to effective coordination, in the context of large-scale reintegration programmes as much as in emergency response. It agreed with the importance of the IASC consultative process, but inter-agency coordination on the ground was the real test.

26. As part of the search for durable solutions, international burden-sharing remained essential to help reduce the negative economic and ecological impact of refugee influxes in the developing world, and increasingly to sustain protection. In that connection, she was grateful for the clear reaffirmation of the principle of non-refoulement and the emphasis on the plight of uprooted women and children.

27. She appreciated the strong support for UNHCR's change process and was aware that close management-staff consultations would be especially important in the coming period. She assured the members that their advice and observations would be taken into account. UNHCR officials and staff would do their utmost to balance delegation and decentralization, on the one hand, with strengthened oversight and a streamlined yet more effective headquarters, on the other.

28. UNHCR could and must encourage dialogue which concentrated on the human dimension of refugee problems. Too often, solutions remained blocked because that type of dialogue was absent. At the same time, however, all should be conscious of the limits of humanitarian action, which should not become further politicitized. Problems which were essentially political could not be prevented or resolved by humanitarian means.

29. She thanked the delegations for their support and reaffirmed UNHCR's determination to continue its partnership with other United Nations bodies and the NGO community to solve the problems of the millions of uprooted women, men and children.

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION (agenda item 13)

30. After an exchange of courtesies, the CHAIRMAN declared the forty-seventh session of the Executive Committee closed.

The meeting rose at 11.25 a.m.